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ABSTRACT

At-risk students are often poor and members of minority groups. Solutions to the dropout problem are inseparably tied to combating poverty and could stimulate far-reaching educational change. Researchers have identified several elements of successful dropout prevention programs, including the need for early prevention; aggressive leadership; parental involvement; school-based solutions; attainable goals; empowered practitioners; a focus on continuous progress, problem-solving, and teamwork; smaller classes; integrated school and community services; and a caring, respectful attitude toward students. Three representative successful programs are: (1) the Accelerated Schools Program developed at Stanford University and replicated in Illinois schools; (2) the Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures Initiative aimed at establishing community collaboratives to address youth problems; and (3) Baltimore's Success for All program for disadvantaged innercity elementary school children, based on Robert Slavin's research findings. To solve dropout problems, educators must identify school population characteristics, examine the district's management information system, utilize its resources, pick workable solutions, and get community support for district goals. (14 references) (MLH)

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Promising Strategies for At-Risk Youth

By Alan Baas

Early in 1990 President Bush, in concert with the nation's governors, named a 90 percent high school graduation rate by the year 2000 as one of six national education goals. When he did so, he gave official recognition to a groundswell of school/community efforts over the last decade that have sought to deter "at-risk" youth from dropping out of school.

Those at risk tend also to be among the "disadvantaged"; disproportionate numbers of them come from families at or below the poverty level and are members of minority groups. Thus a solution to the dropout problem is inseparably tied to waging a war against poverty. The stakes are clearly high and the solutions involved may stimulate far-reaching, systemic educational change.

Common Characteristics

One clear indication of the magnitude of concern over the dropout problem is the plethora of literature generated in response to it. For educators wanting a reliable guide, both the American Association of School Administrators (Brodinsky and Keough 1989) and the National School Boards Association (McCormick 1989) have published overviews of the problem. Countless other authors have scrutinized successful programs to distill the elements that might be applicable to other schools and cities. Following are some of their findings:

- Begin prevention early—in kindergarten or first grade. Dollars spent on early intervention can yield up to a six-fold savings in potential future costs of dealing with children who drop out.
- Aggressive leadership—by school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers—is needed to make things happen.
- Parents are crucial. Incorporate them any way you can.
- Specific solutions must be school-based, rather than delivered from above, and should be woven into a comprehensive K-12 program (Hamby 1989).
- Remedial programs are out. Rather, stress high ethical and intellectual standards matched to realistic, attainable goals. Offer an "alternative strategy *for* learning, not an alternative *to* learning" (Conrath 1989).
- Teachers and principals need the training, encouragement, and "empowerment" to become active decision-makers. All participants should understand precisely how they fit within a clear, predictable structure in which strategies can be adapted to meet each student's specific needs (Levin 1987).
- Teaching should focus on continuous progress in language skills and emphasize problem-solving and teamwork. Teachers need to be tough, compassionate, and professional. They also need to possess a strong sense of how to relate to the particular cultures represented in their students (McCormick 1989).
- Classes—and, when possible, schools—need be smaller to facilitate interaction and one-on-one contact with students.
- Districts and state departments of education should serve as resources and encourage decision-making to be made where it counts—at the local level. Principals should be freed from bureaucratic tasks to work more closely with teachers and students (Levin 1987).
- Students should never be allowed to disappear into anonymity. The school environment should be a place in which students are esteemed for their unique abilities and strengths (Hamby 1989).
- Educators should integrate their own services and goals with those of the basic social and health services in the community (Wehlage and others 1989).
- School leaders need to mobilize the entire community. Businesses, senior citizens, clubs, and service groups may all provide extra funding, resources, and volunteers to work with students (Slavin and others 1989).

To show how these principles have been put into practice, the following sections describe three representative successful programs.

Accelerated Schools

The Accelerated Schools Program (ASP) developed at Stanford University by Henry Levin and his associates (1991, 1990, 1987) has been replicated in more than fifty schools, most notably in a network of Illinois schools (Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools 1988). ASP accelerates learning so that students are able "to close the achievement gap and perform at grade level by the time they leave sixth grade" (Levin and Hopfenberg 1991).

Bringing children into the educational mainstream, Levin adds, means "more than bringing them up to grade level in basic skills measured by standardized tests. We are referring also to . . . capabilities in problem-solving and communication as well as their educational aspirations and self-concept as learners." A key ASP concept is the "unity of purpose" that enhances "the capacity of school staff and parents at local school sites to take responsibility for the educational outcomes of at-risk students by providing the resources, expectations, and empowerment to make educational decisions on behalf of such students" (Levin 1987).

Operational decisions rely heavily on small group task forces and a schoolwide steering committee with extensive parental training and involvement. Parents must affirm their children's educational goals; watch their health, sleep, and study patterns; talk with them regularly about their schoolwork; and be truly interested. When necessary, services for parents should include adult basic education. Instructionally, ASP is "constructed on the strengths and culture of the children with a heavy reliance on interesting applications, problem solving, active

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and 'hands-on' learning approaches, and an emphasis on thematic learning that integrates a variety of subjects into a common set of themes" (Levin and Hopfenberg).

New Futures

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures Initiative addresses "the failure of community institutions to do what they can do to equip youngsters with the expectations, opportunities, supports, and incentives they need to become aspiring, responsible and successful adults" (Annie E. Casey Foundation 1989). The foundation currently provides between 1 and 2.5 million dollars annually to five cities plus smaller grants to two additional cities to fund New Futures Programs, designed to restructure community institutions so that they can better meet the needs of at-risk youth.

Each program begins by establishing a community partnership (Wehlage and others 1989) with the general goals of increased school achievement, reduced dropout and pregnancy rates, and increased young adult employment. "A social experiment in progress," New Futures requires this "community collaborative" to plan, coordinate, and implement specific youth-serving programs and "promote fundamental institutional changes." Success depends on the governing board's ability to identify the youth problems, evaluate current efforts, create legitimate plans, raise new money and reallocate existing resources within agencies, and settle "turf" issues over services delivery.

Ultimately, Wehlage explains, it is "intended to trigger and sustain a political process which is powerful enough not only to modify the services that institutions provide, but actually redefine institutional objectives as well as how those institutions are held accountable and how they interrelate." Basic characteristics include early intervention, positive incentives for both institutions and students, integrated services, increased school building autonomy, individualized instruction, teacher training and retraining, an enhanced management information system, and some form of case management to ensure that each at-risk youth receives regular, significant contact with a skilled adult.

Success For All

The Success for All (Madden and others 1989) approach at an innercity Baltimore elementary school, where 80 percent of the student population is "disadvantaged," reflects the research findings of Robert Slavin and his associates. Built on a commitment to "prevention and immediate, intensive intervention," the program strives to provide students with extra help "early, when their problems are small, to allow them to catch up with their classmates."

The program is funded in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

In the Baltimore school Madden describes, six tutors are provided for grades K-3. Each tutor works one-on-one with about eleven students per day. In addition, the school's half-day preschool and full-day kindergarten focus on developing students' language skills. Continuity between the classroom and the students' outside lives is attended to by a Family Support Team consisting of two social workers and one person in the role of parent liaison. This team handles home visits, involves parents in school activities, and makes referrals to outside agencies. A program facilitator works with the principal, district resource people, and community volunteers. Detailed teacher manuals coupled with inservice training workshops reinforce the steady, consistent "commitment to success for all."

It's a Solvable Problem

The literature is unanimous in identifying the key to dropout prevention: think positively and act accordingly—with vigor. Identify your particular population's characteristics. Look seriously at your district's management information system and utilize its resources to gather as many examples of solutions for your particular problems as you are willing to digest. Pick those solutions that you can personally commit yourself to.

Get the commitment rippling outward. Make the challenge and your goals public and never stop reminding the entire community of its stake in what you are doing. Solutions will cost more money than is typically available to public schools. Help your community to understand this and identify ways in which it can help. There are as many ways to face this challenge as there are creative, committed individuals who care about our nation's children.

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